

# ‘Freedom of assembly is my right. Society needs to give it to me.’

The first female National Professor and Ekushey Padak awardee Dr **Sufia Ahmed** has had a long, illustrious career in academia and beyond. She was the chairperson of the Department of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Dhaka as well as Bangladesh Itihash Parishad. She has represented Bangladesh as a delegate at the United Nations General Assembly and at UNESCO General Conference. But beyond that, she also belongs to a group of brave men and women who will forever be remembered in history as the ones who marched for our mother tongue. At the age of 87, Dr Ahmed is one of our last few remaining connections with the momentous day of February 21, 1952 when the pillars of West Pakistan received its first blow from the people they oppressed. Refusing to be intimidated into silence, Dr Ahmed and her compatriots marched out into the streets, louder than ever. That is where the conversation starts. We spoke at her residence in Gulshan. Dr Ahmed has given many interviews to the media in the past, but this time she chose to talk while lying in a medical bed, reminding us, once again, how close we are to the moment when the history of 1952 will only be in books. The interview, taken by **Zyma Islam** of The Daily Star, has been consolidated for clarity.

**How do you recall the days before February 21, 1952?**  
I was a student at the Department of Islamic History and Culture at Dhaka University at that time. There used to be frequent meetings on campus organised by Gaziul Haque (an activist leader during the language movement). The students were actively engaged.

I was never affiliated with any political party, but I used to go to the meetings which would pivot around the decision to make Urdu the state language. The boys used to come at the girls’ hostel for the meetings—there was only one hostel for girls at that time. It was decided then that we would march in protest against the decision about Urdu being the state language.  
Men and women marching together was a rare occurrence. We would study together, but congregating at the same spot on the street, shoulder to shoulder, had never happened before. This was the first time that female students of Dhaka University got out to march.

We were to meet at 8 am on February 21, at Amtala. But the night before, they imposed Section 144, restricting people from congregating. I think they knew something was going to happen and so they announced the imposition of Section 144. We called each other up and confirmed that we would meet at Amtala, breaking the curfew.  
On the day of the march, my father’s friend, who was the superintendent of police in Dhaka at that time, requested me not to



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Dr Sufia Ahmed lying in a medical bed, as she speaks to *The Daily Star* on February 19, 2020.

join the movement. He asked me to stay at home. I think they knew what was going to happen. The government’s people were prepared to be violent with us should we violate their orders.

**How did the day proceed?**  
I was among the first group of women to march out. It was around 11 am or 12 pm. By that time, two groups of boys had already marched out but they were picked up by police trucks.

Along with me were Rowshanara Bacchu, Dr Shafia Khatun, and Shamsunnahar Ahsan. You know, Shamsunnahar used to wear a black burkha; she was never involved with politics but that did not stop her from joining the march. When I saw her at Amtala, I was surprised. “What are you doing here?” I asked. “I couldn’t help but come,” she replied. We were headed toward the East Bengal Assembly Hall (now Jagannath Hall).  
The girls were sent out in the hope that at least the police would not attack women.

But the police charged at us with teargas and batons. The teargas was so painful! My eyes were watering constantly, and I could not see anything. I was hurt in the leg, and Rowshanara Bacchu was seriously hurt at the hip. Our saris were torn. They were not differentiating between men and women. The boys were pelting brick chips from above at the police, and there were stones falling on us too.

We scattered and started running. The home of the provost of Salimullah Hall was nearby, and so we snuck inside the premises to take shelter. His home had a huge garden, and we sat under the trees, and washed our eyes. There we sat until 4 pm—nobody came out to ask us inside and rest. Around 4 pm, we tried to get out to seek some first aid. When we tried to get out in the afternoon, a man came up to us and told us, “Girls, where are you all going? You cannot get out, stay put!” That is when we noticed that the general public—not just students, but people of all ages—had joined the protest. Suddenly, we heard the sounds of bullets being fired.

We had no idea that the march would turn like this.  
At night we went back to the girls’ hostel, and called home. My mother came to pick me up and took me home.

**Did you face any resistance from home, before heading out to protest?**  
No, I did not face any resistance from home. My father was a liberal man. He used to always work for the development of the

Bangla language and our subcontinent. He used to be a minister in Ayub Khan’s cabinet for three and a half years. During his time in the government, he noticed first-hand how the West Pakistani regime dominated us. He was also a judge at High Court and the first founder-chairperson of Bulbul Academy. My father used to write letters to his friend, a retired district judge, and I learned from those letters of his sentiments. He also sent me to London, to get a PhD at that time and age.

**Since you have marched against oppression yourself, and you have been attacked when marching for your demands, how do you perceive freedom of assembly?**  
It is my right. Society needs to give it to me. For me, I could not tolerate any oppression against my mother tongue. If I cannot talk freely in the language I speak, it will mean vanishing my identity. This is a basic human right for me.

**How important is it to research the history of our country, to avoid knowledge gaps?**  
History shows how people succeed and fail. History repeats itself. Unless we study history, how will we know how to handle the present? Those who are research-oriented have to take personal initiatives to find out what similarities our current situation has with the past. The conflicting party politics of our country has tried to impact the ideology of the people. Whoever is in power tries to rewrite history. We did not have this during our time. Party politics has had a negative impact on the study of our history.

# Once Upon a Time... in Bangladeshi Cinema

*A review of ‘Nibandha Chalachitra’ by Iqbal Karim Hasnu*

SARAH NAFISA SHAHID

**I**QBAL Karim Hasnu, an author and film critic, currently based in Toronto, is also the founding editor of *Bangla Journal*, an annual semi-academic bilingual (Bangla and English) publication coming out of Canada. *Nibandha Chalachitra* (The Essay Film) is his collection of essays on world cinema, film theory, and Bangladeshi film history. The book covers the breadth of his prolific career as a critic and his lived experience as a member of the short-lived Bangladeshi alternative cinema movement.

It was the year 1983 when Iqbal Karim Hasnu first met filmmaker Tareque Masud. The setting for their meeting was Bangladeshi Chalachitra Sangsad (Bangladesh Film Society), where a group of “shustho” filmmakers such as Tanvir Mokammel and Manjare Hasin Murad would get together to discuss cinema, often facilitated by Salimullah Khan.

It is difficult to translate *shustho chalachitra* into English without losing some of its totality. I have heard people translate it as “art film,” and some members of the film movement call it “alternative film.” But it translates to both and neither. Often attempting a socially conscious narrative and often paying homage to the purely artistic and textual quality of films, in a cinephile’s language, *shustho chalachitra* should translate to Cinema with an uppercase “C.” Le Cinema.

It is this Cinema that interested both Iqbal Karim Hasnu and Tareque Masud. They met in Dhaka through the alternative cinema movement of the 80s and 90s and grew closer later in Toronto, where Hasnu had moved to and where Masud would visit with his films during festivals. The two bonded over their mutual admiration for another era-defining cinema giant: Satyajit Ray.

Hasnu’s love for Ray is evident in the multiple essays he wrote on the filmmaker in *Nibandha Chalachitra*. In the chapter “Ray-er obhijog” (Ray’s accusations), Hasnu, through Ray, explores this very idea of *shustho chalachitra* or socially conscious films and whether they can ever attain the mass appeal

of what we now recognise as masala films (think of Bollywood and Dhallywood post-90s). Hasnu investigates this concept further through the films of Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen, and through the chapters on Aparna Sen and Tareque Masud.

Tareque Masud’s films, especially in later years, were produced in close collaboration with cinematographer Mishuk Munier. Hasnu’s introduction to Munier was through the poet Zia Haider who was staying at the author’s Toronto home during a trip to Canada and had invited Munier over. Munier was working as a journalist at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) at a time when the organisation was going through rapid downsizing—the possible reason for the closure of Munier’s show *CounterSpin*. Hasnu, too, had worked at CBC previously and was no stranger to corporate layoffs. In one of the essays in the collection, he weaves together a mini-memoir of his long conversation with Munier at St. George subway station in Toronto where the two spoke about film, documentary, and journalism.

As the author recounts in his book, he had planned a road trip with Munier from Toronto to Montreal to attend the Montreal World Film Festival the year that Tanvir Mokammel’s *Lalsalu* and Masud’s *Matir Moyna* had been selected. While the plan for the trip never materialised, Hasnu did attend the screening of *Matir Moyna* on his own. In his mini-memoir, he chronicles the feeling of joy and pride after the screening.

*Matir Moyna*’s release in 2002 and subsequent success at Cannes Film Festival opened new horizons for Bangladeshi cinema. The story of a boy from then East Pakistan who was sent to a madrasa revealed the sensitive positioning of Islamic institutions during Bangladesh’s liberation war. Despite the skilful artistry, some speculate that the 9/11 terrorist attacks worked in favour of the film’s success. Hasnu writes (loosely translated into English by yours truly):

“In the post-9/11 world, when global politics had muddled the perception of Islam, *Matir Moyna* may appear as reactionary to Islamic radicalisation. However, the film’s

narrative has a lot to say about the socio-political situation of that time, making it significant for years to come.”

Hasnu artfully places *Matir Moyna* as a response to Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s military rule rather than a reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Partially based on Masud’s childhood, the film attempts to deconstruct the role of religion and religious authorities during Bangladesh’s independence war—an aspect the Ershad regime was working to overshadow. At a time when a group like Jamaat-e-Islami, the party that opposed the independence of Bangladesh, was being legitimised as part of a revisionist project, *Matir Moyna* was crucial in adding nuance to the post-independence trauma and amnesia.

*In the process of canonising Masud, Hasnu comes back to Satyajit Ray whose film Pather Panchali has had an undeniable influence on Matir Moyna.*

In the process of canonising Masud, Hasnu comes back to Satyajit Ray whose film *Pather Panchali* has had an undeniable influence on *Matir Moyna*. The parallel is most recognisable in the character arc of *Matir Moyna*’s Anu and Asma and *Pather Panchali*’s Durga and Apu. Hasnu is certain that the uniqueness of Masud’s films will eventually achieve a similar, if not the same, level of importance in Bengali film history as that of the films of Satyajit Ray.

The book also touches on another of Ray’s filmmaking disciples: Aparna Sen. In the essay “Aparna’s Nareepath” (Aparna’s feminist discourse), the author champions the trailblazing feminist philosophy in Aparna Sen’s films. Referring to films such as *Gaynar Baksha* and *Paramitar Ek Din*, Hasnu observes the female lead’s departure from the

conventional passive heroine image in South Asian cinema.

The author takes a particular interest in Sen’s treatment of sexuality in *Parama* and *36 Chouringhee Lane*. The use of de-aestheticization in both films provides the female protagonist with an agency over their sexualisation (unlike what is imposed onto them by the cinematic male gaze). Building on the feminist theories of Jasodhara Bagchi, Hasnu remarks that this de-aestheticization works in taking back the agency that sexual women are often denied in cinema. Cinema, after all, has been instrumental in the objectification of women in contemporary visual culture, and Hasnu believes that the medium will be able to break away from that construct.

A common thread in the book is the author’s regard for the New Wave. It’s emblematic of the very generation that he hails from—the politically and culturally charged youth of the Cold War era. In many ways, the best essay in the collection is the introduction to his book and to the style of filmmaking that the book borrows its name from: the essay film. Hasnu builds on Georg Lukacs and Theodor Adorno, amongst others, to develop a theory on the essay film, which derives its style from the documentary style but goes beyond that when applied to fiction.

The essay film favours editing over the sound and image elements of a film in order to present an argument. The author, or filmmaker, in this case is ever so present. Naturally, the essay film was also championed by the auteur generation of Godard, Verda, Truffaut, etc., who liked revealing themselves somewhere in the narrative. The author’s politics comes alive onscreen through Brechtian interventions. Blurring lines between documentary and fiction, the director is transparent about messaging.

Many film theorists, most notably Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, consider the essay film to be dialectical. Images in an essay film are essentially two-sided, and the cinematic medium not only explores the subject but also examines the ways of seeing that subject. Hasnu views this dialectical quality of essay

films to be of superior value due to its ability to evoke self-reflexive inquisitions onto the audience.

Throughout the book, Iqbal Hasnu traces the emergence of essay film and its relation to global politics and Bengali cinema—and by extension, he returns to the question of how the essay film shapes his idea of *shustho chalachitra*. He writes (loosely translated into English by me):

“On the one hand, the country’s cinema halls were filled with the tyranny of plagiarised, dumbed-down, distasteful, vulgar movies (you can hardly call them cinema at this point). On the other hand, due to the birth of video stores, middle-class households were bedazzled by grotesque Bollywood masala comedies or *Dirty Harry*-type Hollywood thrillers on their VCR.”

According to Hasnu, while the 90s brought in a hoard of spectacle-driven cinema (what eventually evolved into “theme-park movies” à la Martin Scorsese), the essay film provoked an aggressive and urgent re-examination of the status quo. Thus, the essay film stands in support of *shustho chalachitra*.

Just like in an essay film, the author Iqbal Karim Hasnu is widely present throughout the book as an essential archivist of the Bangladeshi alternative film movement. The collection of essays acts as a documentation of the time and environment in which filmmakers such as Masud and Mokammel were operating, and it does so through the lens of Hasnu’s personal, lived experience. *Nibandha Chalachitra* not only offers a lot to chew on for Bengali cinephiles interested in Fellini, Bertolucci, Kurosawa, and of course, Godard, but it also proves essential in historicizing Bangladeshi cinema of the 80s and the 90s.

*Nibandha Chalachitra* is available at Janantik’s stall # 606 at Ekushey Boi Mela and also at Charcha’s stall at Dhaka Art Summit. It will soon be available on Rokomari.

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Sarah Nafisa Shahid is a film critic based out of Toronto. Her writings have appeared in Hyperallergic, Wear Your Voice Magazine, and The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @I\_Own\_The\_Sky

ON THIS DAY  
IN HISTORY

CLONING OF DOLLY  
FEBRUARY 22, 1997

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